Metamorphosis Moments: New Wineskins

*Mark 2: 18-22*

18Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people[h](https://biblia.com/books/nrsv/Mk2.17) came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” 19Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

21“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. 22And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

A couple weeks ago in the neighborhood was bulky item pickup. Fun! We get a sneak peek into our neighbor’s stuff. We watch as old beater trucks drive by to scavenge. See the old furniture on the curb: the couches stained with pet hair. Plump televisions from the era when TVs were wide before they got Smart. Even saw a wheelbarrow that was missing a wheel! It’s a time to get rid of the clutter. To clear out the old and make room for the new. When we listen to Jesus, we hear him preaching about the new. These are new times, he says. New times need new ways of thinking. New ways of thinking require new operating systems. And unless we change out the wineskins, the new wine isn’t going to hold.

Jesus is tapping into a timeless tension. Changing the wine—the surfacy things—isn’t too bad. But changing the system, well…that’s a different story. Have you ever noticed that humanity has a knack for making monetary changes without really changing anything at all? We might change our language, by making God more gender neutral for example, but the patriarchy still lives. We might change mediums like moving classrooms to Zoom. But the philosophy of teaching—with testing and productivity—still leaves too many kiddos behind. Remember last summer? It was the summer of George Floyd. The heat of racism cooking us all. So big companies like Netflix and Amazon send out statements to their customers saying, “Black Lives Matter.” But when the conversation about reparations surfaced, companies got quiet. We like to say “Don’t through the baby out with the bathwater.” Never mind the baby is 400 years old! Maybe we admit we are always balancing the tension of changing the wine without changing the wineskins.

But there’s Jesus telling us that unless we change the container too, the new wine is going to be wasted. And who, by the way, would want to waste good wine? Of course, Jesus is speaking to religious leaders who are giving him a hard time for letting his disciples eat on the sabbath. They are supposed to be fasting as a sign of their faithfulness, but they are hungry, so they eat. And if we think about it, the religious leaders raise a legitimate concern: How are we to take you and your disciples seriously if you’re not following the traditions? It’s fair to wonder. But Jesus gets direct: “There will be a time for traditions, but there is something new happening here and do you really expect the new thing to fit into the old ways?” Can a patch be sewn onto frayed fabric? Can new metal be welded to rusty metal? Do we nail a new 2x4 into a rotten board? No. The new won’t stick unless there is a new container to hold it.

I once brewed a tasty batch of beer. After enjoying some I decided it would be a good idea to bottle some in some old bottles I had lying around for future celebrations. Except, in storage the yeast woke up. Started building up pressure until one day I heard a loud noise erupting from the closet. I opened the door and found shattered glass with beer sprayed all over the floor and walls. The new beer wasted because the old bottle couldn’t hold the pressure. Jesus says new times require new containers. New seasons need new systems. New wine must have new wineskins as well.

So here we are. Inside of a new time. For some of us it is the first time we’ve been in church in a year-and-a-half. And things have no doubt changed. Some of us, in the new era, discovered we aren’t held down by a job. So we retired early or made a shift in the career. Others slowed the fast-paced life and gardened more, reassessing what brought them joy. Many of us learned how to navigate Zoom and got more tech-savvy—I even preached one Sunday on my phone from the front seat of the car. We adapted: our communion adapted. The choir has adapted. Our way of being church, also must adapt. Perhaps in this way the virus has offered us a gift: it forced us into a space where we discovered that we aren’t held down by the old way. And if there is a time we are set free to change the wineskins, this is it.

Of course, we will stumble around trying to figure things out. We might trip over ourselves as we do church in the new age. But perhaps in the process we will find ourselves being held in the container of God’s grace and compassion. And that’s what really matters, isn’t it? So we are free to do church differently. We are free to live boldly. Free to practice wide-open love.

Why? Because grace and compassion is the wineskin which carries us all. And on the inside is the new delicious wine, which never grows old.